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Summary record of the 6th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 2 October 2000, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Ms. Dinić (Vice-Chairman) ..... (Croatia)
later: Mr. Rosenthal (Chairman) ..... (Guatemala)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative And Budgetary Questions: Mr. Mselle

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Reports of the Joint Inspection Unit

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Agenda item 121: Pattern of conferences (A/54/849; A/55/32, A/55/134, A/55/182, A/55/259, A/55/410 and A/55/430; A/AC.172/2000/6)

1. **Ms. González Posse** (Chairman of the Committee on Conferences) introduced the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2000 (A/55/32). The Committee had adopted by consensus all the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report and recommended to the General Assembly that it should approve the revised draft calendar of conferences and meetings for 2001.

2. The Committee had noted with appreciation that the overall utilization factor for conference-servicing resources had exceeded the benchmark of 80 per cent. Following consultations, letters containing recommendations for improvement of the utilization of conference resources had been sent to the chairpersons of the bodies whose utilization rate had been lower than 80 per cent; such letters would also be sent to the incoming chairpersons of those bodies.

3. With regard to the provision of conference services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States, the Committee had noted that the percentage of such meetings to which interpretation services had been provided had risen steadily and that a more flexible approach to scheduling and even greater vigilance in planning meetings well in advance, including the prompt release of unutilized services, could have resulted in a higher percentage of requests satisfied.

4. Regarding improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the Committee had noted with satisfaction that the creation of a permanent interpretation service offered great potential for Nairobi as a venue for United Nations conferences and meetings.

5. The Committee encouraged efforts to promote a more coordinated approach within conference services aimed at providing services from all duty stations more effectively and efficiently, and it had requested the Secretary-General to submit a comprehensive report to the General Assembly as soon as possible analysing such problems as might exist related to recruitment in language services at all duty stations and proposing actions to address them. It had also urged the Secretary-General to implement the system of incentives to attract language staff to duty stations with high vacancy rates, as approved by the General Assembly in paragraph 7 of resolution 54/248 D, to report on the measures taken, and to develop further a system of incentives for that purpose.

6. The Committee had examined requests for exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243 and had recommended to the Assembly that it should explicitly authorize six bodies to meet in New York during the main part of its fifty-fifth session.

7. The Committee had examined a note by the Secretariat (A/AC.172/2000/6) containing six proposals aimed at improving the timely distribution of pre-session documents. It had welcomed the development of those proposals, supported the implementation of the first two by the Secretariat, and recommended to the General Assembly that proposals 3, 4, 5 and 6 should be formulated as recommendations to intergovernmental bodies. It had also requested the Secretariat to prepare a compendium of guidelines on effective and efficient use of conference services.

8. The Committee had noted with respect to page limits that, although the number and proportion of documents issued in accordance with the established and desirable page limits had increased, compliance with the limitation targets for both intergovernmental and Secretariat documents continued to be partial. It had further noted that documents significantly in excess of the page limits created an additional burden and could jeopardize their timely issuance. Efforts to reduce the length of documents even further should therefore be concentrated on those cases in which page limits were applicable.

9. The Committee had reiterated its understanding that the introduction of remote interpretation was not intended to replace traditional interpretation systems without the explicit approval of the General Assembly. It had requested that future reports on the matter should include an analysis of the cost of any proposed system and of its impact on the working conditions of interpreters, and it had recommended that remote interpretation should not be confined to specific duty stations and that the Secretariat should explore every opportunity for its introduction.

10. The Committee had encouraged the continuation of the efforts to develop and implement new

technologies in the area of conference services and had expressed its appreciation for the work done by the staff, particularly in the Translation and Editorial Division, often on a voluntary basis.

11. The Committee had commended the efforts of the Department of Public Information in developing the United Nations web sites and had noted that it had now become necessary to consider Internet activity as part of the work programme of the Organization. It was essential for the full development, maintenance and enrichment of the web sites that each content-providing office should provide content as part of its regular programme of activity and make budgetary provisions accordingly. The Committee had noted the electronic display of the meetings programme at the United Nations Office at Geneva and had encouraged the Secretariat to develop such a display at other duty stations.

12. **Mr. Mselle** (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions) introduced the report of the Advisory Committee (A/55/430) containing its views and recommendations on three reports of the Secretary-General. Concerning the report on provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States (A/55/182) the Advisory Committee had concluded, on the basis of that document and of the information furnished to it orally, that the provision of services to such meetings had improved. It had been informed that the services were provided on an as-available basis and that the Secretary-General's budget estimates were usually based on the experience of the preceding two years. The Advisory Committee's attention had also been drawn to the concern about the reduction in temporary assistance for meetings in the biennium 2000-2001, which needed to be evaluated carefully so that the acquired experience was reflected in the proposed programme budget for the next biennium.

13. Regarding the report on improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (A/55/259) the Advisory Committee had noted that the permanent interpretation service would become operational on 1 January 2001 in accordance with General Assembly resolution 54/248 B.

14. As for the report on remote interpretation (A/55/134), the Advisory Committee regretted the lack of results from the planned experiment and urged the Secretariat to clarify the technical aspect of the question as quickly as possible.

15. The Advisory Committee had also examined the question of information technology, which the Under-Secretary-General for Management had introduced at an informal meeting of the Fifth Committee. It was awaiting information on an information technology strategy pursuant to the recommendations which it had made in its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001 (A/54/7).

16. **Mr. Jin Yongjian** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services) said that benefits were now being reaped from the establishment three years earlier of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services. The Department's various units had worked together to service an unprecedented number of major events such as the Millennium Summit and the special sessions of the General Assembly, in addition to regular meetings, playing an invisible but indispensable role. In view of the heavy workload scheduled for the coming year and the persistent financial constraints the Department had stepped up its coordination efforts. June had seen the first coordination meeting of the conference service managers from all the Secretariat duty stations to examine such issues as ways of sharing the workload, harmonizing workload statistics, and adopting a common approach to technology. The plan was to make such meetings an annual event. His visits to the United Nations Office at Nairobi and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in 2000 and the visits to the Economic Commission for Africa and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean planned for 2001 were also designed to promote coordination. The need for greater coordination would be kept firmly in mind during the preparation of the next programme budget.

17. With regard to the utilization of the conference-servicing resources and facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, although the possibility that the Committee on Conferences might hold its substantive session in 2000 in Nairobi had not materialized, the creation of a permanent interpretation service there, as mandated by the General Assembly, was proceeding. Another planned step was to establish a Division of Conference Services, and the Department was engaged in consultations with the Office on the budgetary and administrative aspects.

18. The Department was aware of the importance of the timely issuance of pre-session documents and had done everything in its power to accelerate the processing of documents, despite their frequent late submission. As the Committee on Conferences noted in its report, the problem had to be solved through the concerted efforts of all the parties concerned. In that connection, in accordance with the decision of the Fifth Committee the Department had begun to indicate in a footnote that the text of a document had been submitted late. It was also preparing a compendium of guidelines on procedures for effective and efficient use of conference services. Those measures had made it possible to meet the deadlines for the issuance of the documentation for the present session to a greater extent than in previous years.

19. The Department seemed always to be running in a race which it could not win. No matter how fast it ran, it was never fast enough. The demands always exceeded its capacity. The enormous fluctuations in the demand, and unexpected requests, had been addressed with palliatives instead of definitive solutions. What had been achieved had been due to the skill and dedication of the Department's staff, which all too often worked under physical pressure and mental stress. While no one was suggesting that conferences and meetings should run like clockwork, the users of the Department's services could help the Secretariat in its efforts by planning well in advance, exercising restraint in requests for services, and being more efficient and cost-conscious in their work.

20. The Department had given the highest priority to improving quality, with emphasis on training, recruitment of more temporary assistance, and the use of technological advances, which were playing an increasing role. Remote translation, now a routine practice in the Department, computer-assisted translation and speech recognition, whose use was making progress, should not be regarded as cost-saving measures but as means of providing better services.

21. The Department was proud of its achievements but also aware that more needed to be done; it was using the recent experience of major events to improve its services. It appreciated the Committee's understanding and support and looked forward to closer cooperation. It would spare no efforts to provide quality services to the Committee and to the United Nations at large.

22. **Ms. Ausseil** (France), speaking on behalf of the European Union and of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Cyprus, Malta, Turkey and Norway, congratulated the Committee on Conferences on its work and gave full approval to the recommendations and comments made in its report. She thanked the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services for its efficient organization of the proceedings of the Millennium Summit and noted in that connection that the European Union had argued that the establishment of the Department was a means of strengthening the management of conference services in the Secretariat and had supported the institutional arrangements for its better coordination.

23. The European Union reiterated its dedication to the principle of the equal treatment of the six official languages and the importance which it attached to conference services. It was also in favour of equal treatment for the various United Nations headquarters stations; it welcomed the creation of a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi and the cooperation among its different departments and between the Office and the Department in New York. It hoped that the use of the conference facilities at Nairobi would increase and welcomed the approaches from intergovernmental bodies and private-sector organizations interested in the services offered.

24. With regard to the coordination of conference services, the European Union noted with satisfaction the dialogue established among the Secretariat, the Member States, the secretariats of intergovernmental bodies, and the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna. It looked forward with interest to the revision of administrative instruction ST/AI/342 on host-country agreements.

25. Turning to the calendar of conferences and meetings, she said that the European Union agreed that the periods of heaviest workload at the various duty stations should not coincide with each other, and it therefore welcomed the Secretariat's planning efforts. It was also glad that the overall utilization rate of conference services had exceeded 80 per cent in 1999 and re-emphasized how important it was for all organs and duty stations to achieve that target. It agreed with the Secretary-General that careful planning of the meetings of regional groups would make it possible to

meet their requests for services more fully; the meetings of Charter and mandated bodies should be given priority in the provision of services. Furthermore, in view of the importance of recruiting language staff and of their career prospects, it requested the Secretary-General to put into practice the managed-assignments system and apply the established system of incentives; it looked forward to his reports on both matters.

26. The European Union re-emphasized its interest in remote interpretation and in obtaining an analysis of its cost and its impact on the working conditions of interpreters, and it took note of the recommendation of the Committee on Conferences that each duty station should be considered as both recipient and provider of such services. With regard to new technology, the European Union congratulated those staff members who had acquired the necessary skills and were endeavouring to use them. It took note of the hidden costs mentioned in the report of the Committee on Conferences and would be grateful for more information from the Secretariat, which it requested to formulate a comprehensive strategy for all the conference centres. Lastly, it supported the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee on Conferences concerning the Organization's web sites: the objectives should be achieved economically and with the emphasis on content.

27. **Mr. Hassan** (Nigeria), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, stressed how important it was for the Secretariat to continue providing conference services, including interpretation, in the six official languages to meetings of regional groups. The Group welcomed the prompt implementation of the General Assembly's decision to create a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi and thanked the Secretary-General for the action taken.

28. *Mr. Rosenthal (Guatemala), Chairman, took the Chair.*

29. **Mr. Hamidullah** (Bangladesh) said that his delegation agreed with most of the observations and recommendations contained in the report of the Committee on Conferences. It welcomed in particular the improvement in the utilization of the conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi but would like the Secretariat to supply additional information on the practical steps taken with respect to human resources since the adoption of the General Assembly resolution on the question. It supported remote interpretation in principle as a means of increasing productivity, but in view of the recent initiation of a permanent interpretation service at Nairobi it might not be prudent to experiment in that field.

30. His delegation supported the recommendations of the Committee on Conferences concerning the distribution of documentation and hoped that they would help to address the perennial problem of late issuance. With regard to the mobility of language staff, it was worried about the high vacancy rates in the language services and requested more information about the use of the managed-assignments system.

31. Since the increased number of requests for conference services from regional groups reflected their greater involvement in the consideration of the issues confronting the Organization, Bangladesh re-emphasized the need to provide services to such groups. In addition, since innovations such as the Internet had become an indispensable element of modern-day interaction, Bangladesh reiterated its support for the use of information technology throughout the Organization. Lastly, it took note with satisfaction of the Secretary-General's appointment of a focal point for multilingualism.

32. **Ms. Bentley-Anderson** (United States of America) said that, contradictory as it might seem, the responsibility for the efficacy of the services furnished by the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services lay first with the Member States and to a much lesser extent with the Department itself, for it was the Member States that took the decisions.

33. More than once the Member States had rejected technological innovations which would have enabled the Secretariat to provide improved services under the pretext of furnishing equal access to information to third parties outside the United Nations system which were not ready for the new technology. That was a travesty, for the recipients of the General Assembly's services ought to be the Member States themselves. Some people disapproved of remote interpretation and translation and of computer-assisted translation, but technological improvements which might benefit all the Member States could not be cold-shouldered. To continue blocking progress would be suicide for the Organization. The argument that only the countries of

the North benefited from technological innovations was specious should no longer be tolerated.

34. It must be remembered that technology was not the only form of innovation. During the deliberations of the Committee on Conferences the Bahamian delegation had rightly stressed how important it was for the Member States to communicate their needs or desires to the Secretariat so that it could make changes in services without incurring big additional costs. Innovation was not always designed to take away; it could also add things, improving and increasing the levels of satisfaction and productivity. The introduction of performance standards would enable the Member States to maximize the Organization's resources through careful planning. The Secretariat would set the standards and the Member States would approve them and use them to evaluate the results. That would improve the dialogue between the Member States and the Secretariat. Such a system had not yet been fully implemented. It took courage to lay down limits, instil the necessary discipline, and set realistic goals which took account of the resources available and the demands of all the parties.

35. The Member States must recognise that the Secretariat would never be able to meet all their demands, and they must therefore try to be more realistic in their expectations. But it was clear that it was for the Member States, not the Secretariat, to agree on the limits to be set. Her delegation believed that the demands currently placed on conference services were unrealistic. There must be a plan, discipline and priorities.

36. Perhaps the most important thing was to eliminate waste. As could be seen from the documents on interpretation services, the use of performance standards had enabled the Secretariat to identify the largest obstacle to provision of adequate interpretation services. The number of hours wasted when bodies did not cancel their requests for interpretation early enough for the Secretariat to reschedule the resources matched almost exactly the number of hours during the past year for which it could not provide the interpretation services requested by regional groups and other bodies. It was thus clear that the membership, not the Secretariat, was responsible for that waste. It would also be useful for United Nations organs to reserve some time for meetings of regional groups within the hours allotted for formal meetings, in order to facilitate the deliberations and cut waste to a minimum. Some organs had already implemented such a measure, which appeared to work.

37. The Member States were requiring the Secretariat to make available to the public, both on paper and in electronic format, an ever increasing number of documents in the six official languages. That was not the best use of the limited resources of a department whose purpose was to serve the Member States when there were other departments better suited to deal with such matters. Increasing the resources for conference services was not the solution. Precious few delegations wanted to spend more money on conference services or on any other area of United Nations activity. But unfortunately the United Nations had no mechanism for redistribution of its scarce resources. The Member States were scared to move money to areas where it was needed because they had no model to guide them. The Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services had created a valid model for setting realistic priorities and useful and easily understood performance standards which clearly reflected the current trends. That model should be used throughout the rest of the United Nations system as a benchmark for setting priorities and evaluating activities. All that was lacking was a set of priorities clearly defined by the Member States, which should make good that lack at the present session.

Agenda item 117: Programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001 (*continued*)

Programme budget implications of draft resolution A/C.5/54/L.83 (A/54/690/Add.2; A/C.5/54/64; A/C.5/54/L.83)

38. **Mr. Mselle** (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions) said that in document A/C.5/54/64 the Secretary-General had set out the programme budget implications of draft resolution A/C.5/54/L.83, under which the General Assembly had authorized the Committee on Conferences to hold its 2000 substantive session at the United Nations Office at Nairobi. However, that session had been held at Headquarters in New York, and if the General Assembly decided to authorize the Committee to hold some other session away from Headquarters another report on the programme budget implications would have to be produced on the basis of the assumptions applicable at the time when the meetings were to be held.

39. **The Chairman** suggested that the Committee should inform the General Assembly that the situation had evolved in such a way that it was unnecessary for the moment for the Committee to take a decision on the matter.

40. *It was so decided.*

Programme budget implications of General Assembly resolution 54/283 concerning review of the problem of human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome in all its aspects (A/C.5/55/L.4)

Draft decision A/C.5/55/L.4

41. **Mr. Ramos** (Portugal), Rapporteur, introduced draft decision A/C.5/55/L.4 on the programme budget implications of General Assembly resolution 54/283 concerning review of the problem of human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome in all its aspects, and said that the members of the Committee had approved the text of the draft decision by consensus in informal negotiations.

42. *Draft decision A/C.5/55/L.4 was adopted.*

43. **Mr. Repasch** (United States of America), speaking to explain his delegation's position, said that it reiterated its support for the special session which the General Assembly had decided to hold to consider the problem of HIV/AIDS in all its aspects. However, some details of the programme budget implications were not entirely clear and would have to be determined and explained more precisely once an agreement had been reached on the dates and other particulars of the special session. With regard to the budget envisaged for the Department of Public Information, his delegation considered that that Department and others should not focus so much on promoting the special session as on implementing long-term measures to eliminate the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS and should allocate resources to prevention of the terrible effects of the illness. It was also necessary to intensify the efforts to collect information on the best prevention practices currently in use in the world; the ones introduced in Uganda, Senegal and Thailand should be highlighted.

Agenda item 116: Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations (*continued*) (A/C.5/55/L.5)

Reports of the Joint Inspection Unit

Draft resolution A/C.5/55/L.5

44. **Mr. Park** (Republic of Korea), Vice-Chairman, introduced draft resolution A/C.5/55/L.5 on the reports of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU). He said that the members of the Committee had approved the text of the draft resolution by consensus in informal negotiations.

45. *Draft resolution A/C.5/55/L.5 was adopted.*

46. **Mr. Nakkari** (Syrian Arab Republic), speaking to explain his delegation's position, said that it had joined in the consensus on the understanding that paragraph 6 of the draft resolution would allow the General Assembly to examine the first copy of the budget proposals submitted to the Secretariat by JIU.

47. **Ms. Buergo Rodríguez** (Cuba), speaking to explain her delegation's position, said that it was a very good thing that the General Assembly had reiterated its decision on the need to ensure the operational, administrative and budgetary independence of JIU as an external oversight body for the whole system, and it was glad that during the next examination of the JIU budget the General Assembly would have all the information that it needed in order to take appropriate decisions on the estimates of the resources required by the Unit.

The meeting rose at 4.40 p.m.